

## Original Paper

# John Keats's Geographical Writing and Construction of British National Identity

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### Abstract

*British romantic poets generally illustrate distinctive geographical writing characteristics. Among them, John Keats is a representative in composing geographical space from a multi-dimensional perspective, either real or imaginary, thus illustrating the natural aesthetic characteristics of his poetry and the poet's own humanistic thoughts and political concerns. In his poems, Keats not only wrote about the landscape of English natural geographical appearance, including forests, grasslands, etc., which highlighted his love for Britain and pride in folk customs, but also focused on the human landscape represented by castles and churches, which highlighted the central position of England within Great Britain and the anticipation of integrating Scotland under English control. Keats is not confined to a particular moment or a scene, but detached from reality and creating fantasy to incorporate elements of magical mythology in order to fictionalize the natural geographic environment including nature, river, mountains and human geography like castles, thus highlighting his Hellenized Britain and publicizing the civilized image of the Great Britain. On the other hand, he also highlighted the rationality and order of Britain through the mapping of the East, and provided a rational explanation for its Eastern colonization.*

### Keywords

*Geographical writing, John Keats, British national identity, Greek myth, castle*

## 1. Introduction

The era when Keats lived was an era of major transformations in the western world and the emergence of various radical trends. The entire geographical environment, including natural and ecological, artificial geographical fields was undergoing an unprecedented and profound transformation. Keats's early poetry style was closely related to the political background at that time. The spirit and ideology of "democracy, equality and fraternity" brought about by the American War of Independence and the French Revolution inspired Keats and directly aroused Keats's longing for the Great Liberty tradition in England. His early poems like "Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison" are not so much a tribute to his spiritual mentor, but a tribute to freedom. However, in the middle and late stages of his poetry creation, critics believed that Keats's poetry was biased towards aesthetics, including Keats's biographers Finney, Bate, and others. As a result, "non-political", "apolitical", and even "anti-political" became Keats's labels. It was not until Nicholas Roe had invested Keats with new historicism that the critical circle began to realize that Keats's poetry did not deviate from politics and the pertinent political researches went from dying down to restarting.

As a matter of fact, the political researches of Keats in western academic circles gradually heated up after Leask's (1992) *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* had been composed and published and it is Leask that admitted the existence of political sense in Keats's poetry writing. However, in comparison with other romantic poets, Keats was shadowed in their political passion and achievements.

In recent years, some scholars have studied Keats from multidisciplinary perspectives, and we have also been focusing our continuous focus on Keats, especially on his dream writing in view of psychology (Peng & Cui, 2021), his representation of sound, the primitive accumulation of capitalism and the mode of production of capitalism from the perspective of economics (Shen & Cui, 2022). In fact, Keats's poems highlight politics through aesthetics, especially his pondering over the British Empire. Chandler pointed out Keats had never left England before 1818, and only traveled to Scotland with his friend Charlie Brown and only left the British Isles for Italy after completing most of his remarkable poems. But there is no need to swim through the empire because the existence of the empire can be felt every day in the capital of the empire (Chandler, 1998, p. 433). Politics and ideology of the British Empire influenced many romantic writers at the time, including Keats himself. In Chandler's (1998) comments, in addition to affirming the political nature of Keats's poetry writing, he also pinpointed the particularity of Keats's travels, that is, in sense of geography, Keats's travels and attention to the circumstance around him became the key to Keats's researches. This indicates the focus that his poems are permeated with the writing of geographical space, including poets' yearning for freedom and democracy, as well as pondering over the construction of personal identity and national identity.

One of the important literary themes in British literary tradition is the geographical composition of “nature”. Brandes believes, “the English poets, one and all, are observers, lovers, worshippers of nature” (Brandes, 1875, p. 6). Nature constitutes the essential part of geography, and literary geography mainly highlights the migration of a writer to a new place where author’s book-like feelings and understanding of life may undergo certain changes. Literature is produced and developed in “the necessary (though not sufficient) spatial and temporal conditions” (Miller, 2017). Nevertheless, the diversity of geographical environment influences the diversity of regional culture and also deeply influences the diversity of literature. The rich geographical environment factors include mountains, rivers, climate, landform and creatures, which can bring inspiration and rich materials to the world.

Also, certain artificial construction embodies his speculation over the political fate of Britain. Keats’s geographical writing demonstrates his passion for Britain and pride in folklore tradition, thus highlighting his contemplation over national identity. Keats adopted the writing of geographical space to outline the unique scene of the British nation, illustrating a strong geographical sense. These real or fictitious geographical writings also indicate the poet’s affectation, praise and sense of belonging to England, his appreciation and fear of Scotland, his own cognition of the country’s racial exchange of identities. It also contains criticism and critical reflection on England. As Thomas Henry Huxley once commented, “Nations are to a very large extent invented by their poets and novelists”. It is true if we examine Keats’s works, including typical sonnets and poetic narratives.

## 2. Realistic Physical Geography Writing

Keats admired the beauty and harmony of nature. He weaved the scenery description of climates, weathers, landscapes, mountains and rivers etc. into his writing. Besides, he was also good at integrating the Greek mythological elements into creating the imaginative geographical circumstances. The entire constitution of such depiction and portraying not only highlights the Englishness of Keats’s writings, but also shows the overall characteristics of Britishness.

### 2.1 Realistic English Natural Writing: Climate, Natural Landscape, Mountains and Rivers

The writing of geography lies primarily in the typical English environment that helps shape the character and personality of English people. A series of poems including “To Autumn”, “After Dark Vapours Have Oppressed Our Plains”, “On the Sea”, etc, show solely from the titles (or the first line of the poem) the geographical concern of Keats over the sceneries, seasons and geographical characteristics. Keats’s selection of specific seasons and scenes in nature and his meticulous depiction of these features formed a unique geographical landscape of Great Britain and England in particular.

Keats’s natural landscape writing possesses prominent national characteristics. Similar geographical writings include “And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run/ From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead—” and “With his delights, for when tired out with fun/ He rests at ease beneath some

pleasant weed” in “On the Grasshopper and Cricket”. This sonnet was written by 21-year-old Keats on the night of December 30, 1816, when he was sitting indoors with his friends Leigh Hunt and Charles Cowden Clark, sitting by the fireside. This poem is featured with vivid language and comparably expressive power. In his poem, Keats contrasted the two sceneries in the summer field and the winter fireside. Animals and scenery are integrated and complemented with each other to form a harmonious symbiosis picture, which deeply designates his pursuit of the beauty of nature, and an optimistic attitude radiating from the bottom of his heart. It illustrates his strong love for England.

Similarly, “To Autumn” as the last ode of Keats perfectly demonstrates the aesthetic value of Keats’s poetry. During the process of creation, Keats was in London being seriously ill, but he still insisted on writing poems. In fact, London is featured with the maritime climate for it is located in a plain that is mild and humid throughout the year. While immersed and refreshed in such sensuous autumn scenery, his thoughts gradually rose. With vivid and energetic vocabularies, Keats described the fragrance and vitality of England’s melons and fruits. In the last stanza, Keats vividly composed “river shallows”, “light wind”, “Hedge-cricket”, “red-breast whistles”, “garden-croft” and “gathering swallows”, thus illustrating the beautiful daily autumn days.

Johann Gottfried Herder in *Abhandlung Über den Ursprung der Sprache* believes the character of a nation is determined by the geographical environment in which it lives, and people can understand and recognize the nation’s way of thinking and emotional language from related geographic literature (Herder, 1986, p. 93). Montesquieu stated in *Spirit of the Law* that “the inhabitants of warm countries are, like old men, timorous; the people in cold countries are, like young men, brave” (Montesquieu, 1748, p. 161). He agreed the character and even the destiny of a country and nation are closely related to the natural environment. Both philosophical thinkers point out how the environment helps shape the local people. Likely, as an island country, Britain is surrounded by the sea on all sides and the temperature is comfortable. Such an environment shapes British people into a mild personality, which is virtually admitted by him in his diary and highly agreed with.

Besides, Keats brought a glimmer of vitality and hope to life through his meticulous geographical depiction. In his poems, Keats articulated his affection and yearning for the pure rural life in England that had not been polluted by industrialization totally. Keats illustrated the British natural landscape in geographical space, expressed his identity with the British Empire, and demonstrated the poet’s yearning for the free folk customs reflected in geography writing. Keats expressed a strong sense of national pride in his poems. He demonstrated an extreme sense of feelings for the humanities and history of England. He devoted his life to voice freedom that has always been pursued and guarded by England since the past century, “to see no other verdure than its own; to feel no other breezes than are blown/ Through its tall woods with high romances blent”. Also, “Happy is England! I could be content” clearly reflects Keats’s high praise for England’s local rivers and mountains, highlighting its mystery

and solemnity, “to see no other verdure than its own; / to feel no other breezes than are blown” (Keats, 1994, p. 46). As a matter of fact, Keats adopted such writing to construct his perception of England’s identity.

### *2.2 Realistic Scottish Natural Landscape Writing: Appreciation and Fear*

Keats’ s writing of “Sonnet to Ailsa Rock” on July 10<sup>th</sup> and “Hearken, thou craggy ocean pyramid! / Give answers from thy voice, the sea-fowls’ screams!” (Keats, 1994, p. 308) demonstrates the shock at the majestic vitality displayed by Ailsa Rock. In July 1818, Keats and Brown passed the western coast and when they were traveling in Scotland, they met Elsa, a huge rock. Keats (1818) wrote in his letter to his brother, “At the end we had a gradual ascent and got among the tops of the Mountains whence in a little time I described in the Sea Ailsa Rock 940 feet high—it was 15 Miles distant and seemed close upon us”(Keats, 2011, p. 194). From the geographical composition in this poem, it is not difficult to see Keats’s lofty praise of this natural force. In his mind, the rock symbolizes the destructive ancient power and independent spirit of Scotland. Scotland has certain sovereignty and military power, which is quite threatening to England. This brings the poets full of fear and anxiety about its adherence to the sovereignty of England during the tour. During the era when Keats lived, England and Scotland had always experienced sharp contradictions, which Keats believed would threaten the political stability of England as the political centre and the unity of the British Empire.

Also, after visiting Burns’ s tomb during his trip to Scotland, Keats wrote “On Visiting the Tomb of Burns” and “Sonnet Written in the Cottage of Burns” to illustrate his worship and respect for the latter. There were also some natural and geographical writings too, such as “the town, the churchyard, and the setting sun, / The clouds, the trees, the rounded hills all seem” (Keats, 1994, p. 309). Actually, Keats was a little bit dissatisfied with Burns’ s tomb. He sent the poem to his brother Tom on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1818, and complained in the letter that he felt the Scots had not given Burns due respect, for he sensed that “the Clouds, the Sky, the Houses, all seem anti-Grecian and anti-Charlemagnish” (Keats, 2011, p. 118). This also illustrates that Keats was disappointed by the lack of literati who cherished the Scottish national cultural traditions and despised its successors and spreaders (Cui, 2019).

## **3. Artificial Construction of Geographical Writing**

### *3.1 The Writing of the Church*

There is a mutual influence between literature and geography. The natural geographic environment offers writers with reference objects and sources of inspiration, while the artificial construction influences the writer’s writing style and way of thinking through religion, culture, and social background. The perspective of cultural geography connects the activities of the characters with the material world. By analyzing the descriptions of the natural environment, urban architecture and urban space in the works, observing the movement of the characters in different geographical environments and different spaces, so

as to understand the people and the materials. The interaction between the world space and human beings is no longer just regarded as the background and environment in which the realm occurs, but has a richer cultural connotation (Liu, 2021).

The “church” portrayed in Keats’s “Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition” is not only a venue for narrative events, but also a metaphorical deep image of the poet’s religious outlook. The humanistic writing in the opening verse has prominent religious features. Keats’s construction of space in the poem is embodied in these explicit and artificial representations, thus expressing his own special characteristics under this spatial religious background. The beginning of the poem “the church bells” and “toll a melancholy round” laid a depressive and dull tone for the poem, covering the shadow of death. “black spell” in the poems are used to refer to religious concepts that suppress human nature and suppress human rights tightly tied to people’s heads. The people “are dying” like walking corpses under the control of religious beliefs, highlighting the world’s secret messengers have caused them to lose their thoughts and freedom and become the victims of religion. The “church” and the recurring “bell” are both representative symbols of western religions. The bell of prayer in the church is a warning bell of cruel reality. The poet hopes that this warning bell will awaken those people who are deeply-poisoned by Catholicism.

It highlights Keats’s criticism of British religion and his criticism of religious imprisonment. Therefore, the church does not only function as the place where the citizens can conduct their ritual of praying to God, but a place to discipline people’s spirits and thoughts. During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the rulers traditionally chose and distributed the English version of the Bible and propagated the thought of endurance to overcome miseries and difficulties in their current life. The citizens were deceived and persuaded to endure the current life in order to enjoy the peaceful life for the next round after death. Therefore, the existence of church played a significant role in offering support to consolidate their ruling through controlling people’s spirits.

### 3.2 *The Writing of the Pub*

The existence of “public space” in social life is diversified, and there is also a literary space in it. In *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Habermas (1990) pointed out that the literary public sphere is the embryonic form of the political public sphere since the early public space of the bourgeoisie was created in groups related to literary reading. They often conducted literary reviews and criticisms in public places such as bars. People conventionally conducted speech concerning democracy and freedom. Keats’s “Lines on the Mermaid Tavern” also creates a real humanistic space. This is a pub located on London’s Bakery Street and a place where literati often gather, such as Shakespeare, Donne, and Ben Jonson. Although the poet has not personally experienced it, he did create such an ideal and real space through the narration and experience of others. The poet portrayed a humane environment like a fairyland, describing the real tavern as a paradise full of food and wine, to praise these great writers and poets. It is just this

place that carries the memory and imagination of the poet. It conveys Keats's commemoration of the previous influential poets by "Souls of poets dead and gone" and his anticipation of taking "Mermaid Tavern" as the "Elysium and happy field" for the latter poets to pursue their dreams in the track of the those precursors. Keats's pursuit of this ultimate beauty and freedom is the epitome of Keats's philosophy of freedom and democracy, and it expresses the poet's yearning for freedom of speech for English people.

### 3.3 The Writing of the Castle

In *A Survey to Literary Geography*, Zeng Daxing made a clear definition of "geographical space": "The geographic space of a literary work is composed of emotions, thoughts, landscapes (or landscapes), objects, and objects that exist in the work. A concrete and sensible aesthetic space composed of characters, events and many other elements" (Zeng, 2012, p. 143). Keats also constructed a geographical space, namely the castle, in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Different from the real space with realistic basis mentioned above, this is a geographic space made up by the poet through rich ideas and vivid imagination. The castle is usually considered as the landmark building in medieval Europe and even the United Kingdom. The specific space is always closely related to the character's personality and story. Long Diyong pointed out: "Space or 'place' is indeed inextricably linked with the 'self' or 'subjectivity' of 'person' as 'someone'" (Long, 2014). The protagonists Porphyro and Madeline come from feudal families respectively. For Porphyro, the castle is full of the dangerous and the unknown, and even the characters and he himself are mutually hostile. It offers relatively separate places and spaces for the characters to behave and fulfill their functions. The Chamber is a place that is private and serene without risk of being disturbed by the knights of the front hall feast and the long curving stairs designate and reflect the psychological movements of the Porphyro while on his way to hide himself in the cupboard.

The castle is not only charged with the spatial significance for it offers a circumstance for the characters to behave and indirectly promote the ongoing of the plot in narrative perspective, but also possesses the symbolic significance, reflecting the sensitive gap between Scotland and England. From "Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords", "a huge empty flagon" and "warrior-guests", we can see it reflects the poet repeatedly described the guests in the castle as extremely alcoholic and the gross ugliness, thus implying Keats's dissatisfaction with the Scots who behaved inappropriately and drunk all day long and was dissatisfied with his folk customs. When Porphyro entered the castle, "not one breast affords Him any mercy", which implies metaphorically the confrontation between Scotland and England and Scotland's rejection of England. After entering Madeline's boudoir, Porphyro played "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" with the lute, suggesting the union of the two lovers (Cui, 2019). It also symbolizes the anticipation of thorough integration of England and Scotland from the bottom of Keats's heart, and expresses the poet's beautiful vision. The verse of "For o'er the southern moors I

have a home for thee”, Porphyro aimed to take Madeline out of the castle and flee to the south, implying England’s desire for integration with Scotland and the latter’s expectation of integration. However, at the same time, the “storm” in the last verse also indicates the potential difficulties on the way to the integration of the two places.

Keats’s metaphorical writing of the castle implies his concern for the British current politics. Although the Act of Union in 1702 integrated England and Scotland, there only exists the political unification of the above, the culture and people of the two places did not merge and accept each other. The nation-state established under the Merging Act gave the British nation a collective identity and constituted the political basis for national development, but all of this is not enough to unite people of different cultural backgrounds to form a national community (Cui, 2019).

#### **4. Mythological Allusion of Geography Writing**

##### *4.1 Hellenistic Natural Landscape*

Keats is the purest and most sincere admirer and interpreter of Greek culture among the English romantic poets. Many of his poems are full of strong Greek imageries. The most typical ode is no other than “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, in which Keats adopts the rhetorical questions to emphasize the pastoral life of an ancient unknown village, “What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy”.

In the second section, Keats depicted the melodious and euphonious sound of the flute accompanied by singing, showing the unique eternal beauty of Keats’s poems, which seemed to be true and illusory, and there seems to be real music reverberating in the ears: “Mysterious priest, your cow is calling to the sky”. Through such writing, a picture of the priest leading the cow and the residents to worship together comes into the eyes of readers.

Through his writing, readers can sense the cheerful and lively atmosphere of young men and women living in a peaceful and tranquil life. Such depiction illustrates the ideal days of ancient Greece and Keats’s nostalgia eagerness for the glorious past of England embedded in peace and high level of morality, which contrasted with the epoch while Keats lived in.

The poet is full of curiosity and yearning for the mysterious Greek civilization. He seemed to be sent to distant Greek period by this Urn, and to feel and experience these scenes. Rajan once pointed out its appearance indicates an idyllic pastoral entwined with green leaves, but its interior contained the ashes of the dead and the dead civilization (Rajan, 1980, p. 133). Therefore, it can be seen that Keats implicitly expressed his anxiety about the fate of Britain. The wealth of Greek civilization and its important position in history made Keats have a strong yearning and admiration for Greek culture.



#### 4.2 Hellenistic Human Landscape

This point is also reflected in “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”, in which Keats’s representing “The Parthenon” as the landmark construction illustrated his influence on Greek culture and the worship of the Greek spirit. Wang Zuoliang once commented on Keats: “Not only did his poems be fresh and fresh, but his experience of the grandeur of Greece surpassed many Greek researchers.” (Wang, 2008, p. 316) Keats’s integration of Greek village and mythological atmosphere into his writing illustrates his hope for salving Britain from the current morality declination. Keats hoped that the British Empire could reach the same level as Greek civilization. At the same time, he spared no effort in trying to Hellenize England in his poetry to give it the characteristics and elements of Greek culture.

#### 5. Fictional Humanistic Landscape Writing

Edward Said once pointed out that Europe always had the authority to define the East. Europe incorporates the East into Western consciousness and Western empire, while the real Asia is located in a silent and narrated position (1995, pp. 3-5). The political, cultural, and economic concepts of Western countries are very different from those of Eastern countries. This difference makes Western countries construct an idealized “East” to highlight the superiority and advancement of their own national culture (Zheng & Zhang, 2009).

This is also reflected in Keats’s long narrative “Lamia”. The prototype of Lamia comes from Greek mythology. It can originate either from a half-human and half-snake female monster in ancient Greek mythology or a snake demon known for hunting children in the West fairy tales. Besides, this image can also date back to Asian legendary story of female snake showing affection for her male savor. Although researchers have not designated exactly the origin of such a figure, Keats’ Lamia demonstrates the typical female characteristics like “A full-born beauty new and exquisite;” and “Her soft look growing coy”, demonstrating the brave personality to pursue true love.

What is special about Lamia in view of geographical analysis is the castle description. Lamia adopted the magic to create a castle for Lycius, “That royal porch, that high-built fair demesne” highlights the splendor of the castle. In addition, the poet made use of elaborate gorgeous rhetoric to highlight the magnificence and luxury of the palace (Cui, 2019). Once this kind of literary space is produced, it is charged with strong political significance, since “from ethical value, aesthetic value to political value, there are specific indicators, connotations, tone, posture and fineness” (Wu, 2008).

Keats has done much research on Eastern culture, and this poem also embodies Keats’s views from the perspective of Orientalism. The East in the eyes of Westerners possesses a certain perspective for they deem the East chaotic and full of darkness, but for which Keats did not agree. Judging from Keats’s poems, we can tell his particular appreciation for Oriental culture as well and among which, castle construction is necessarily included.

Under his pen, an amazing description of the construction illustrates Keats's expectation for the romantic and mysterious elements can be found out in the depiction of Lamia's castle, which metaphorically represents Lycius's aspiration for the ideal imagination in the mode of showing a strong willingness to resist Apollonius as the representative of reason. Keats also illustrated the British Empire's intellectuals and politicians held disapproving spirit against Eastern colonies. Keats confronted the rationality of the West by presenting such a humanistic geographic construction of Oriental characteristics, showing that he hoped the British Empire could reflect on the limitation of its own views, and also embodied his anxiety over the identity of Eastern countries.

## 6. Conclusion

As a great British romantic poet, Keats's poetry is featured with geographical writing. Under the political background at the time, Keats's national identity construction and identity recognition can be summarized from these geographical writings. In view of realistic geographical writing, Keats portrayed the beautiful natural scenery of England and expressed his appreciation for the beautiful scenery of England. In view of Scotland, Keats wrote of his natural scenery through a trip to Scotland, expressing his shock of his magnificent scenery and his concern for threats to England. There are also some humanistic landscape writings. The author's depiction of artificial constructions such as "church" and "Mermaid Tavern" has not only clarified his own religious view, that is, abandoning the idea of religious imprisonment of people, opposing to the control of people's freedom, and his longing for the beautiful ideal of free speech. In addition to the actual writing of real geography, there are also some imaginations of natural or human geography in the poetry writing as well. The poet appreciates Greek culture and spares no effort to integrate Greek elements into his poetry, whether it is the imagination of Greek cultural relics or the rewriting of Greek mythology. Both express Keats's worship and yearning for Greek civilization and hope to Hellenize Britain so that it could reproduce the pinnacle of Greek civilization. "Lamia" is also an adaptation of Greek mythology, but Keats gave the protagonist a new character and used a lot of pen and ink to depict the palace created by Lamia. All of this is characterized by the imagery of Eastern countries, and Keats used this space to oppose the limited perspective of Western countries on Eastern colonies.

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